

Naming the dead: Our lives are bound up with all others

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue

Jeremy M. Loveless. Nathanael J. Doring. Richard A. Bennett. James A. Funkhouser. J. Adan Garcia. According to a recent article in the *New York Times*, these are the names of the five soldiers killed in Iraq over the three-day Memorial Day weekend this year. If I had nothing else to say in this column, I would also name the 24 soldiers killed over Memorial Day weekends since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, along with the 4,000-some Americans who have died in Afghanistan and Iraq since the wars in those countries began. I wish I could also name the Afghan and Iraqi dead, but I do not know anyone who keeps track of their names.

Earlier this year, I spent a week at Mount Calvary Monastery in Santa Barbara, where prayer is as regular as a heartbeat. Every morning, every noon, every evening and every night, guests are invited to join the brothers in the chapel—a room made of golden wood and not much else, with one whole wall of windows opening toward the sea. At the daily Eucharist, the same monks who washed our dishes wearing bib aprons showed up in floor-length vestments to serve us communion, taking turns in the chapel the same way they did in the kitchen.

During the week I was there, the prayers of the people included the names of those who had died each day in Iraq. Every day, soaked in the silence of that golden room, I felt their names enter my heart like bullets. Charles D. Allen. Michael L. Mundell. Raymond N. Mitchell. Jeremiah J. Johnson. On January 7, the list was so long that it stopped my breath. Timothy R. Weiner. Wayne Rees. Stephen J. Raderstorf. Daniel B. Miller Jr. Eric T. Caldwell. Elizabeth A. Loncki. Neither the prayers nor the sermons held any commentary on these deaths. Those who had died of war were simply named in the presence of God, along with those who had died of cancer and old age. They were named in the presence of God's people, who make it our business to note even the fall of a sparrow, trusting that our lives are bound up with all other lives in Christ.

What struck me, as I sat there, was that I had never heard these names in church before. I had heard prayers for soldiers known to the congregation, and I had heard prayers for all whose lives were touched by war, but I had never heard the dead named Sunday by Sunday, much less day by day. I also thought I knew why. This particular war is a touchy subject, especially for pastors whose congregations are divided over its necessity. To name the dead might be construed as a political statement. To mourn their loss might be interpreted as a witness against the war.

If we named those who died of war on Sundays, then someone would be bound to ask why we do not name those who died of all other causes as well. The answer is that few of those others died believing that they died for us—to protect us, to save us from our enemies, to shield us from terror. That is what we hear from this war's sponsors, anyway. Whether we believe them or not, this is the reason offered for the deaths of these soldiers. They died for us. The least we can do is stop breathing while we listen to their names.

As a nation, we named those who died in the attacks of 9/11. Sometimes that took hours, but we did it. Now the list of those who have died in Afghanistan and Iraq exceeds those who died in Manhattan, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. When do we read their names all at once, so that we register the full impact of their deaths the same way we registered the deaths of those who died on 9/11?

Last month I heard Jim Forbes, pastor emeritus of Riverside Church in New York City, at the Festival of Homiletics in Nashville. His topic was prophetic preaching. From the stage of the Tennessee Performing Arts Center, he asked upwards of 1,600 pastors what in the world we believed God was mad about. Or did he ask us what we believed was breaking God's heart? Then he turned us loose to speak to the people sitting next to us, so that the auditorium roared with voices for the next several minutes. No one was speechless, as far as I could tell. We all knew something that we believed was breaking God's heart.

"Then why aren't you talking with your congregations about it?" he asked us, when he had called us all back together. Later that day, I opened a magazine in my hotel room and realized how right Forbes was. Graydon Carter, the editor-in-chief of *Vanity Fair*, had more to say about the cost of America's "Age of Denial" than I have heard in any church.

While the media persist in using the word *casualty* as if it meant “death,” my dictionary defines *casualty* as “a member of the armed forces who is killed or injured during combat.” By that definition, the American casualties in this war on terror are not 4,000 but over 27,000 and climbing. As much as we need to keep these numbers before us, we also need to remember that each has a name. James Cartwright. Kevin H. Sonnenberg. Michael A. Bechert. Josiah W. Hollopeter.

To say these names out loud, in the presence of God and God’s people, is not a matter of being for or against the war. It is a matter of remembering that our lives are bound up with all other lives in Christ, as we keep count of those who are worth more than many sparrows.